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FOCUS: Uncertainty remains over Japan-Britain-Italy fighter program

By Will Hollingworth, KYODO NEWS - 15 hours ago - 10:23 | All, World, Japan



LONDON – Experts are divided over whether Britain will continue participating in a fighter jet program with Japan and Italy as the new government begins a comprehensive review of defense expenditure.

The new Labour government claims it has inherited a fiscal black hole, and media reports have suggested that expensive projects, such as the joint fighter jet development program with Japan and Italy, could be for the axe or modified in the Strategic Defense Review being commissioned through the first half of next year.

Defense experts say Britain does need a new fighter jet. Some are cautiously optimistic that Britain will remain in the fighter jet project, known as the Global Combat Air Program, while others think it is far from certain.

Newly installed Prime Minister Keir Starmer described the project as "important" but stopped short of guaranteeing its future.

The GCAP was launched in 2022 and the sixth-generation fighter was promoted by the then Conservative government as evidence of its commitment to Indo-Pacific security as well as the Euro-Atlantic area.



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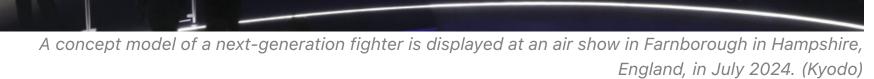
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"In the Strategic Defense Review the government will likely run its thumb across all the major programs of which GCAP is a significant one," said Douglas Barrie, senior fellow for military aerospace at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"They will ask, 'Is there a need and is it affordable? What are the consequences if you go ahead or not?"

Barrie said there is a certain "logic" to the plan as all three nations have similar requirements, namely a fighter with a large combat radius which can carry a lot of weapons internally.

For Japan, the main threat is China while Britain has become increasingly worried about Russia's aggressive posture.

He added the partnership makes sense as Japan has a "capable industrial base" and Britain and Italy have worked on previous big ticket projects.

But the decision on whether to proceed will ultimately be determined by a range of factors such as politics, international relations, affordability, the need to protect Britain's industrial base, and if there are any possible alternatives to the GCAP.

The fighter to be jointly developed by 2035 will be a successor to the Eurofighter Typhoon in Britain and the F-2 in Japan. The development phase starts in 2025.

It will be one of the world's most advanced, interoperable, adaptable and connected fighter jets, boasting an intelligent weapons system, a software-driven interactive cockpit, integrated sensors and a powerful next generation radar capable of providing 10,000 times more data than current systems, according to the three governments.

Despite other big ticket items such as the nuclear deterrent, spending on the war in Ukraine and the AUKUS project -- a joint endeavor by Australia, Britain and the United States to provide nuclear-powered submarines for Australia -- William Reynolds, a research associate at King's College London, is "pretty confident" the GCAP will survive.

"Financially, I think it is doable over the lifetime of the program. It is the primary thing keeping the British defense aerospace sector alive," he said.

"Secondly, this program has solidified the geopolitical relationship with Japan. Thirdly, this government has pushed reconnecting with Europe and I think disconnecting from Italy would be counterproductive to this agenda."

Alternatives to the GCAP also have both advantages and disadvantages.

Critics of the GCAP have suggested costs could be saved by merging the project with a similar fighter jet collaboration taking place between France, Germany and Spain.

Though appealing at first sight, experts say such a project merger would run into problems.

"Bringing in other partners would delay the program as those new countries would want a share of the work. Delays mean higher cost," Reynolds said.

Moreover, experts note the GCAP and European project have different requirements with the latter aiming for a lighter jet that can take off from aircraft carriers.

Some experts have said Britain should wait and purchase the United States' sixthgeneration fighter, which is a replacement of the F-22.

But it is likely Washington will ban its export for national security reasons and, in any event, the costs may be prohibitive, even for a close ally such as Britain, other experts say.



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(Photo courtesy of the Japanese Defense Ministry) (Kyodo)

Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at Warwick University who also believes Britain will proceed with the GCAP, said, "Japan needs an indigenous defense capability and is extremely worried that China is already matching or surpassing it in terms of air superiority."

"The United States is ever more reluctant to sell the very best kit even to its allies and, when it does, it often charges a huge premium with less workshare," he said.

"From the British perspective, having a sovereign capability hedges against any supply issues in the future."

Still, experts largely agree that the GCAP's 2035 deadline is ambitious and predict challenges ahead.

One obvious issue will be securing exports for the new fighter, which has a relatively small production run, in order to benefit from economies of scale during the manufacture, they say.

London is open to enlisting Saudi Arabia as a fourth partner in order to secure exports, but Japan is opposed to the idea, British media have reported.

Hughes believes that further down the line Tokyo might soften and be more open to Saudi financing and exports.

The project's headquarters will be in Britain and the first CEO will come from Japan. Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd., Britain's BAE Systems plc, and Italy's Leonardo S.p.A. will be the companies mainly responsible for the development.

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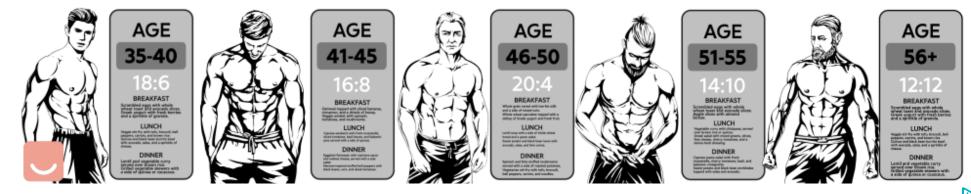
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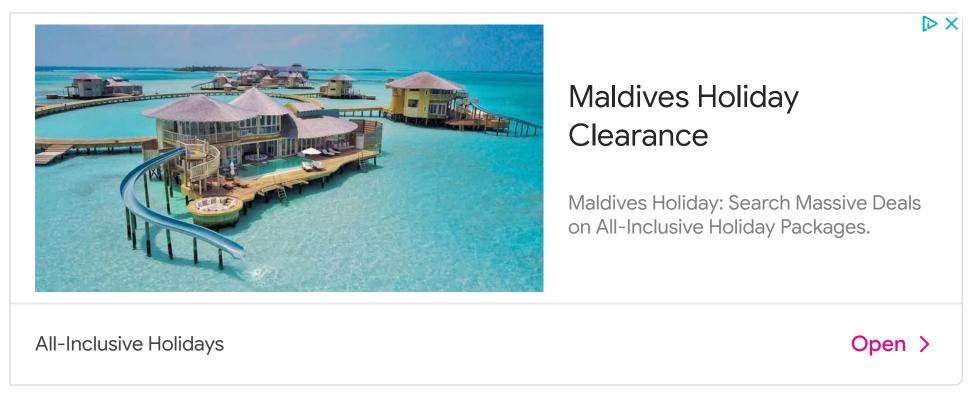
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